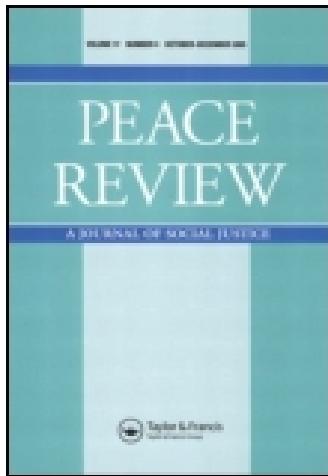


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Fighting Torture and Psychologist Complicity

STEPHEN SOLDZ

On June 7, 2006, the *New York Times* reported that the United States Department of Defense (DoD) preferred psychologists to medical doctor psychiatrists, given the “differing positions taken by their respective professional groups.” In referring to the positions of the professional associations, the Pentagon official was contrasting an American Psychiatric Association statement that psychiatrists could never ethically participate in interrogations with the American Psychological Association’s (APA) policies. The APA policies were developed in June 2005 by a hand-picked task force on Psychological Ethics and National Security (PENS), which gave ethical sanction to the “vital role” psychologists allegedly were playing in national security interrogations at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and elsewhere. Strangely, the membership of this task force was kept secret from both the press and the APA membership.

Distribution of this article on a listserv on which I was active catapulted me into a life-changing struggle against psychologist involvement with the Bush administration torture program. Members of the listserv, long critical of the APA policies on psychologists’ aid to Guantánamo interrogations, for the first time began to question the motives of APA leadership. As I had been writing Web commentary on political and psychological issues for several years, I decided to write an article placing the APA position in the historical context of long-standing ties between the APA, the profession of psychology, and the military-intelligence establishment. This article appeared in *CounterPunch* just days after Mark Benjamin revealed in *Salon* that the PENS task force had been dominated by a majority of members from the military-intelligence establishment, many of whom had served in chains of command—at Guantánamo, CIA “black sites,” Afghanistan—accused of abusive treatment of detainees.

Publication of my article led to phone calls from reporters covering the APA controversy and from activists trying to change APA policy. I thus gradually found myself in a leadership position within a growing movement to remove psychologists from participation in abusive interrogations, to

investigate the roles of psychologists and other health professionals in the “enhanced interrogations” torture program, to change the APA so that the organization would no longer support questionable government activities, and to get the psychology profession to confront the broader ethical issues highlighted by the interrogations controversy.

This movement succeeded, to a degree, in changing official APA policies. To counter our efforts to withdraw psychologists from Guantánamo, the APA leadership proposed a ban on psychologists participating in the use of certain listed torture techniques, albeit with loopholes. We then forced the removal of those loopholes. The movement identified a provision that had never been used before, one that allowed for a member-initiated referendum. The referendum called for a change in APA policy so that psychologists could no longer participate in detention facilities, like Guantánamo and the CIA “black sites,” which operate outside or in violation of international law or the Constitution. The referendum passed by a landslide 59 percent.

As we were working to change APA policies, we were attempting—along with reporters, human rights workers, attorneys, and investigators—to unravel the Bush administration’s torture program and the critical roles of psychologists and other health professionals in that program. Many of the results of these investigations are well-known, but they bear summarizing here.

The Bush administration decided to engage in torture—referred to by the CIA as “enhanced interrogations”—only months after the 9/11 attacks. Psychologists from the military’s Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) program were enlisted to design and, in some cases, implement the interrogation strategies, based on the psychological idea of inducing “learned helplessness.” Other psychologists in the military’s Behavioral Science Consultation Teams (BSCTs)—at Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, and Bagram, among other sites—monitored interrogations and gave advice on how to conduct them more effectively. At times, this advice included recommendations for ratcheting up the pressure on detainees to “break” them. The BSCTs sometimes used information in detainee files to identify weaknesses, such as phobias, to be exploited during interrogations.

At the same time, other health professionals, including psychologists, conducted research without the subjects’ consent in the form of systematic data collection on detainees, in violation of the Nuremberg Code, the Geneva Conventions, and United States laws and regulations governing research on human subjects. This monitoring and research was part of a cynical attempt to provide legal protection to the torture program by creating “evidence” that the abuses did not cause harm that rose to the level that Justice Department lawyers claimed—in their torture memos—was necessary for abuses to be legally classified as “torture.”

As the struggle progressed, we developed a more sophisticated understanding of our opponents. Initially, we hypothesized that the APA was essentially paying off a debt to the military for the benefits given to professional psychology by the military. We were aware that the ties between the military and the APA were deep, going back as they did to the profession's prehistory in the two world wars. We also were aware that the military had played a major role in the APA's promotion of drug prescribing privileges for psychologists through the Psychopharmacology Demonstration Project of the 1990s, which trained ten military psychologists to prescribe, thus providing the "data" needed to promote prescription privileges in other venues.

But investigation and experience revealed that APA leaders had a deeper involvement with the military-intelligence establishment. The wife of one of the APA's top leaders was a BSCT psychologist aiding Guantánamo interrogations. This leader played a pivotal role in influencing the development of APA's pro-interrogations policy, while his wife helped shape Pentagon policy for the BSCTs. An APA Senior Scientist went from the association to the Bush White House, where she helped promote the use of psychology in counterintelligence efforts, including interrogations. That psychologist is now chief of research for the Obama administration's High Value Detainee Interrogation Group. Two APA presidents took trips to Guantánamo and, like naïve visitors to Stalinist Russia, returned denying reports that abuses were occurring or that psychologists were engaged in questionable activities. Another APA president served on the CIA's Professional Standards Board and was a board member of Mitchell Jessen & Associates, the psychologist-led firm the CIA hired to design and implement its "enhanced interrogation" torture program.

Perhaps as a result of these entanglements, significant sectors within the APA were working on creating a new specialty of "national security psychology" (in the military this field is known as "operational psychology"). As we gradually realized, the push for this new specialty significantly predated 9/11 and the Bush administration.

As we investigated the complex web that tied the APA to the military-intelligence establishment, we also came to realize the techniques the APA leadership used to deflect attention from their agenda. Given the attention focused on the role of psychologists in abusive interrogations, they used a multitude of mechanisms to deflect attention from the abuses they were helping cover up.

A wide variety of deceptive responses was used by APA leadership. First, there was identification with the aggressor, whereby APA leaders moved quickly after 9/11 to seek funding for the psychology profession from and influence with the administration and the military/intelligence establishment. They staged joint conferences with the CIA and other security agencies on interrogations and related topics while engaging in extensive lobbying of

intelligence officials. Second, APA leaders rigged the process. That is, an ethics task force (Psychological Ethics and National Security or PENS) was created that was secretly dominated by psychologists from the military/intelligence community.

Third, the APA engaged in denial, whereby its leaders cast doubt on reports that psychologists were aiding abusive interrogations, or minimized this involvement as the actions of a “few bad apples,” rather than as part of a systematic government program. As former APA President Gerald Koocher stated in a 2006 “President’s Column” piece in the *APA Monitor*: “A number of opportunistic commentators masquerading as scholars have continued to report on alleged abuses by mental health professionals.”

Fourth, the APA tried to turn the issue into a matter of isolated, individual perpetrators, where critics were challenged to name individual psychologists involved in torture and to provide definitive evidence of their involvement in specific abuses; failure to provide this evidence was used to discredit critics of APA policies. As President Koocher continued in his 2006 column: “However, when solicited in person to provide APA with names and circumstances in support of such claims, no data have been forthcoming from these same critics and no APA members have been linked to unprofessional behaviors.” When names of APA members linked to unprofessional behaviors and evidence of the links were provided, though, the APA still failed to act.

Fifth, APA leaders characterized psychologists as merely “here to help” keep procedures “safe and ethical.” Thus, the APA repeated, as if a mantra, that “psychologists have a critical role to play in keeping interrogations safe, legal, ethical, and effective,” ignoring increasing evidence that they were actually keeping interrogations “safe, legal, and ethical” by monitoring abuse and providing legal cover for torture.

Sixth, APA leaders claimed psychologists were acting no differently than other professionals. To accomplish this, the positions of the American Medical and Psychiatric Associations were distorted to make them virtually indistinguishable from the APA position, despite radical differences. Seventh, the APA “parsed pain” by passing anti-torture resolutions with loopholes that could be interpreted to allow continued participation by psychologists in many forms of psychological torture. Seventh, the APA engaged in repressive tolerance and endless “dialogue.” That is, the APA encouraged endless discussion in order to promote their position that participating in a program of abusive interrogations was a “complex issue,” one on which “reasonable people” can differ; these differences were then used as excuses for inaction.

Finally, APA officials feigned shock when it acknowledged that “a few” psychologists may have participated in abuses. Thus, when revelations—including release of the Justice Department “torture memos,” the declassification of the Senate Armed Services Committee report on interrogations,

and statements to National Public Radio by a member of the PENS “ethics” task force defending SERE-based interrogations—no longer allowed the APA Board to continue maintaining that abuses involving psychologists had not occurred, they acted as if they just discovered that, perhaps, a few psychologists did indeed aid the torture regime, and they suddenly realized that some members might (unjustly) blame them for years of collusion and inaction. The 2010 APA president even asked a state licensing board to remove the license of a CIA consultant psychologist who was not an APA member, while refusing to take any action against similarly accused psychologists who were APA members.

These institutional defenses utilized by central APA leadership were reflected in the attitudes of the few hundred members who are active on the association’s Council of Representatives and in governance of the APA’s 50+ divisions. Most of these active members took the leadership’s word that the critics were wrong, that psychologists were not involved in abusive interrogations, and that APA was strongly opposed to torture. Even those unhappy with APA policy refused to enquire why APA had adopted problematic policies. Stanley Cohen, in his detailed study of denials of human rights abuses, refers to this technique as “not having an inquiring mind” and concludes: “many institutions . . . are full of people who do not have inquiring minds.” The APA, we discovered, was full of people without inquiring minds.

As our understanding of the torture issue and of the APA leadership’s roles and mechanisms of deflecting criticism evolved, so too did our strategy and tactics. Our understanding that the APA had not simply made a decision with which we disagreed, but was closely tied to the military-intelligence establishment, when combined with an understanding of the mechanisms used to deflect criticism, led us to realize that we were unlikely to change APA policies simply through discussion and debate within the leadership circles. We thus decided to exert pressure on the APA from outside those circles.

This effort was multi-pronged. We used existing e-mail lists—of APA divisions, and of other groups with numbers of psychologists—to reach out to the psychologists active on them. At the same time we launched a public information campaign, using traditional and new Web-based media to reach both psychologists not on the lists to which we had access, as well as the broader public. I wrote dozens of articles for such online sources as *Counter-Punch*, *ZNet*, *Scoop*, *Alternet*, *Common Dreams*, and *Truthout*, among others. Other colleagues, such as Jeffrey Kaye, wrote about these issues for other Web sources. The existence of these “new media” online sources gave us the opportunity to reach thousands of people very quickly. My colleagues and I published many more articles and position statements under the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology umbrella. We simultaneously built ties with journalists in the traditional media, including learning the art of writing press releases and

developing the skills to handle numerous broadcast interviews that resulted from our work.

An important part of our information strategy was to respond quickly to the latest developments in the APA, including when the leadership issued new statements on the interrogations issue. We thus responded to the APA's FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) posting, carefully dissecting their disingenuous responses. In August 2007, when the APA passed an "anti-torture" resolution with loopholes paralleling Bush administration practices and refused to answer questions as to whether the statement was condemning the CIA's "enhanced interrogation" torture program, we launched a campaign to point out the loopholes. The campaign led the APA to remove those loopholes at its next Council of Representatives in February 2008. Statements dissociating the APA from the most notorious psychologists connected with the torture program were met within days by articles describing the APA's long-standing ties to those same individuals.

As our movement started, we were supported by colleagues from the Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) Campaign Against Torture. PHR helped create the initial links between activists, and provided logistical support, links to the press, and training in press relations. They also provided strategic advice, which we did not always accept, but which was always thoughtful and helped us clarify our own thinking. Together we initiated investigations into the role of health professionals and APA officials in the torture program, which resulted in a fuller picture that informed our organizing efforts. We also gradually developed links to the broader human rights movement, which gave greater weight to our positions. Among psychologists, the national organization Psychologists for Social Responsibility gradually became more active in pushing for torture accountability and APA reform. As a result of these efforts, a 2009 letter to the APA Board was signed by eleven health, human rights, and religious organizations.

Following the advice of Jean Maria Arrigo, a psychologist concerned with the ethical reasoning of military and intelligence professionals, we developed ties to a number of retired intelligence professionals who had themselves opposed aspects of the Bush administration torture program. Consulting with these individuals provided a broader perspective and sometimes challenged some of our assumptions that arose from our backgrounds in peace and other progressive movements.

Starting in late 2006, a large group of psychologists, organized by Ghislaine Boulanger, started withholding their APA dues in protest of APA policies and actions on torture and national security interrogations. These dues withholders, organized around a listserv and taking organizational form in Psychologists for an Ethical APA, represented another wing of our decentralized yet coordinated movement. Psychologists for an Ethical APA organized

rallies at the 2007 and 2008 APA conventions. This group also found the by-laws provision that allowed members to initiate a referendum, and wrote the 2008 referendum condemning psychologist participation in detention sites.

This diverse movement succeeded in changing a number of APA policies and in forcing the organization to concede that “a few” psychologists had participated in unethical abuses. So far, however, we have failed to get APA to take any action that concretely challenges any U.S. government action or policy. Thus, as of this writing, two years after an overwhelming majority passed the referendum against psychologist participation in detention centers, psychologists still serve at Guantánamo and Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan without APA leaders ever stating that they are violating APA policy, thus defying the clear intent of association members. Perhaps most fundamentally, we have so far failed to change the structure or leadership of the organization so as to reduce its ties to the military-intelligence establishment, or to prevent the development of a national security psychology closely tied to that establishment.

Moving forward, activist psychologists need to keep pressure on the APA, the largest organization of psychologists in the United States, indeed the world. We need to keep investigating the web of APA–intelligence connections. And we must continue questioning the growth of a national-security psychology that does more to serve the interests of the U.S. intelligence community and organized psychology, than to aid in human betterment.

It is especially important that the role of psychology in classified research and operations, if any, be carefully examined. The military and the CIA require their psychologists to be licensed by a state licensing board; these organizations claim that ethics enforcement is provided by those boards and by the APA. Those boards and the APA, however, rarely have access to information on classified activities. Even when they are provided with strong evidence from public records, they are loath to take on the military-intelligence establishment by disciplining psychologists from the intelligence sector. This circle of disowned or avoided responsibility renders psychologists involved in these activities essentially immune to ethics oversight. For this reason, among others, a strong case can be made that being a professional psychologist is incompatible with engaging in classified intelligence activities.

Over the last decade, the struggle against national security detention and interrogation abuses has had the unfortunate effect of distracting attention from the often extremely brutal criminal justice and penal system in the United States, which has grown exponentially over the last thirty years. The emphasis on the legalized abuses being carried out against largely Muslim foreigners accused of being “terrorists” was justified, perhaps, as it was opposing the creation of a new regime of legalized brutality that might serve to legitimate increasingly brutalizing tendencies in U.S. culture. In any case, it is to be

hoped that many of the psychologists and human rights advocates who have fought against these abuses within the national security context will also join the struggle against domestic prison abuses, including psychologist and health professional collusion in this victimization.

In terms of the broader anti-torture struggle, while anti-torture activists forced the U.S. administration of President Obama to officially renounce the torture program, activists have so far failed to bring about any measure of truth seeking or accountability, whether through criminal investigation and prosecution or through a Commission of Inquiry. Further, the Obama administration has vigorously defended many of the Bush-era legal doctrines that protect the torture program from scrutiny and deny victims any venue for restitution. At times, the Obama administration has asserted positions regarding the extent of executive authority and state secrets that exceed those asserted by the Bush administration. Thus, in this area as in others, efforts to place human rights at the center of U.S. policy still have a long way to go.

For many psychologists, participation in intelligence interrogations was a metaphor for the transformation of our profession from a force for good into an adjunct to state and corporate power. This issue raises profound questions regarding the appropriate limits and ethical guidelines for our practice and research. The APA ethics code, which is the basis for most codes adopted for licensed psychologists by U.S. states, has as its Principle A: "Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm." While this is a beautiful principle, it is belied by many activities engaged in by psychologists, often with the encouragement of the APA, including classified intelligence work and psychological operations (psyops), but also the creation of false "needs" to aid the marketing of otherwise unneeded products, and sometimes problematic aid to corporate employers, including advice on how to break union drives. These issues will get more troublesome as new discoveries in psychology and brain science vastly increase the power to influence and sometimes manipulate others. It is far past time for psychologists to engage in a deep, careful deliberation as to what kind of profession we are and want to be. The dialogue concerns not only psychologists, but everyone who is concerned about the ability of those with power to manipulate others.

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